

OPINION

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WHAT IS "COMMUNALISM"?

A. G. NOORANI

THE Bombay Parsi Panchayat deserves to be congratulated for honouring 15 members of the richly-talented Parsi Community who have won high distinction in various walks of life and rendered service to the country and to the community. One is reminded on this occasion of a most instructive and revealing interview which the late Sir Homi Mody gave to *The Times of India* thirty-five years ago which was published in its issue of August 29, 1947.

Referring to the rights of minorities in the Constitution of India which was being drafted, he said "So far as Parsis are concerned, the position as I found it in the early stages of the discussions in the Minorities Sub-Committee was that the very existence of the community as a national minority was being questioned in certain quarters. This was the result of its renunciation all these years of any special privileges for itself, either in the legislatures in the public services. My business was, therefore, to secure a sort of statutory recognition for the community as an important minority which had played a notable part in the struggle for the political and economic emancipation of the country. When this was secured, I decided to follow the traditions which the community had maintained in the past and withdrew all claims for special reservation. . . .

"From the report of the discussion which took place yesterday in the Constituent Assembly, I find Mr. R. K. Sidhwa has sought to make out that I had veered round to his point of view. With regard to that, I would only say that if Mr. Sidhwa had had his way, Parsis would not have received any sort of recognition and would not have figured at all in the political map of the country. Happily, the Minorities Sub-Committee did not regard him as representing the Parsi point of view, and the community is today in the position of having secured a recognition of its special place in the political life of the country and has earned for itself general goodwill."

The Parsis have been doubly fortunate. They are outstandingly talented and well endowed as well as free from being discriminated against. The only regrets one can have about them are that they are so small in number and in recent years have not participated in politics to the extent they could well have.

But ask yourself just one question—had the Parsis, indeed, be-

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discriminated against, is there the slightest doubt that any of its leading figures would have failed to speak up? And if they had done this basic duty to the community and to the country, could one have doubted their patriotism?

Some R. K. Sidhwas, no doubt, would have seized the opportunity to ingratiate themselves with the powers that be. But none would have taken them seriously.

Ours is a plural society governed democratically under the rule of law. Every interest has a right to voice its views, demands, grievances and laments—labour, industry, peasants, a whole range of interests whether State, municipal, teachers, students—and minorities, linguistic, cultural or religious.

The Constitution of India reflects this liberal outlook. The fundamental rights not only assure every person, whether a citizen or foreigner, of equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws (Article 14), but recognise the minorities as a collective entity by conferring on them certain rights as *minorities*. "Every religious denomination" is assured the right to establish its own religious and charitable institutions (art. 26); every linguistic minority has the right to "conserve" its "distinct language, script or culture of its own" (Art. 29) and "all minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice" (Art. 30). If, then, any of these rights of a minority is violated—for example, discrimination in recruitment in police service or discrimination by the police services in affording protection from violence—can it fairly be argued that the minority itself must keep quiet and not protest?

Yet, this is precisely the attitude adopted towards the Muslims. Unfortunately, the community has produced a rich crop of Sidhwas of the most hideous kind. They go so far as to deny that the minorities have a distinct interest which calls for protection. Thus, on December 29, 1980, at the first session of the B.J.P. when the political resolution was being discussed, Mr. Mehboob Ali made an innocuous and unexceptionable suggestion—the minorities' interests must be protected. The mover of the resolution, Mr. Sikandar Bakht, rejected the suggestion in the good *Uncle Tom* manner. "Minorities were not second rate citizens and had equal rights as the majority had under the Constitution. The use of the terms majority and minority should be avoided." (The Hindustan Times, December 30, 1980).

The first proposition is a dishonest equivocation. Equal rights under the Constitution and equality of actual treatment are two different things. By now it is fully accepted that Muslims have not received fair treatment; in the matter of public employment, for instance. That Mr. Bakht would like to avoid the very mention of the term minorities reveals his outlook. By himself, the man is beneath notice. As an illustration of the *Uncle Tom* phenomenon, he ranks lower down in the tribe of *Muslim Sidhwas*.

Not one of these *Uncle Toms* nor their patrons will have the decency of the do admit the glaring facts which Mr. K. F. Rustamji, a member of the the world of

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National Police Commission and former Director of the BSF, well summed up in June 1979: "We suspected the Muslims, in turn (after partition), derided them, kept them away from the services. We would not allow them to develop trade; no licences, no support, no funds. They were considered unreliable... steadily, the Muslims went down economically and socially, while speeches were made about our secularism.."

The discrimination was particularly noticeable in the police services because it was systematically, efficiently done.

A gathering of Muslims which voices these grievances is called communal. But a gathering of Muslims, sponsored by the establishment, to voice support to its foreign policy, for instance, is highly publicised at home and abroad and lauded as nationalistic. What rank hypocrisy is this?

Consider the recent episode of the Muslim MPs' memorandum to the Prime Minister. On November 5, 1982, 44 Muslim Members of Parliament, including those belonging to the ruling Congress(I), submitted a memorandum to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Repeated attempts by these MPs for an appointment with Mrs. Gandhi were ignored by her which led some of the signatories Syed Shahabuddin (Janata), Ebrahim Suleiman Sait (Muslim League), Rashid Masood (Lok Dal), Syed Ahmed (Democratic Party), Ashfaq Hussain (Democratic Socialist Party), A. U. Azmi (Lok Dal) and G. M. Shawl (National Conference) to issue a statement on December 14. The statement pointed out that the logic and the language used (by the Centre) was so far characteristic of the RSS, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the *Organiser* and urged all Muslim and secular-minded ministers in the States and the Union Government to assert themselves or resign from the office. The *Janata* (weekly) has published the text of the memorandum.

Among other things it says "Irresponsible talk about the wave of Islamic Fundamentalism and the banal references to 'foreign hand' and 'foreign money,' not only poison the atmosphere but serve to create a fear psychosis in the Hindu community, to check its generous and tolerant impulses."

Ironically, these groundless charges were levelled shamelessly by the very journalists who now accuse the MPs of being communalists. Those for instance who saw a foreign hand in the Moradabad riots of August 1980 and had not the elementary decency to retract the charge when it was demonstrated to be false are also the ones who condemn the MPs. That these journalists are ardent advocates of Mrs. Gandhi is not irrelevant. And that Mrs. Gandhi refused to see the MPs is not surprising, either. Nor the fact that the Congress(I) M.P.s backed out of a public protest.

For the truth is that Mrs. Indira Gandhi has consistently exploited Muslim grievances and RSS and Jan Sangh bigotry to exacerbate the communal divide in order to perpetuate her power. During the election campaign she courted the Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid, Syed Abdullah Bukhari, and wrote him a letter (November 21, 1979) containing

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ing certain assurances. The Imam is now her bitter critic.

After the Turkman Gate firings during the emergency, Mrs. Subhadra Joshi wrote to Mrs. Gandhi in these terms on April 27, 1976: "You have entrusted Delhi and the Musalmans of Delhi whose houses we guarded and who had been assured by you, to a few officers and few others whose intention and sanity you yourself would start doubting if you knew the whole thing."

Mrs. Joshi was removed from the Chairmanship of the Minorities Department on the ground that she was inciting the minorities. The then Union Home Minister, Mr. Brahmananda Reddy, revealed at the A.I.C.C. on January 18, 1978, that Mrs. Gandhi discouraged anybody from visiting the Turkman Gate area.

She made a pointed reference to the incident at the A.I.C.C. on May 30, 1976, and warned that no religious or other group would be allowed to come in the way of the "the nation's progress." When city planning was undertaken on such a massive scale there was bound to be some hardship to some people and "when there are shortages it is proper that what is available goes to those who follow our policies."

Such was the state of things that President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed's speech at the Id Milan on December 2, 1976, was blacked out by **Samachar** because he advised the people not to "get frightened or fear anything while demanding their rights."

Should he be dubbed a communalist, too? It was well said by Mr. Nehru that those members of the majority community who have the communal approach try to pass it off as nationalism.

The Muslim M.P.s were certainly within their rights in presenting the memorandum. Their wisdom is another matter. In the final analysis, every act of discrimination against any Indian is an Indian lapse from Indian ideals and, therefore, an Indian concern. This has been overlooked by all, including the opposition parties. But enlightened Muslim MPs must ask themselves whether the cause would not have been strengthened if they had tried to secure the support of non-Muslim MPs along with the Muslim M.P.s to the very memorandum which they drew up. A good few would have joined and the cause would have been better served. Or, were none ready to join?

By itself advocacy of a particular interest is not wrong. Good citizenship is the art of grading one's loyalties—to one's self, family, neighbourhood, city, State, Union, and not least to humanity. It is only pursuit of a narrow interest to the detriment of the larger interest which is wrong. Which is why one condemns "narrow nationalism". Likewise advocacy of the community's interests. It must not be done at the expense of the national good. The Muslim M.P.s did no such thing. True, no community should ever be oblivious to such a danger while legitimately articulating its grievances. Communal political parties are bad in themselves but not so a group representing a community which ventilates its grievances and many of whom belong to secular political parties.

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OF ART AND HAIR

GAURI DESHPANDE

JAPAN must surely rank as the most art-loving country in the world. I have visited museums and art galleries in all parts of the world now, but nowhere else have I had to stand in a queue to look at a picture. In fact, in most places these venerable institutions wore a rather forlorn air and I could even sit down in front of such renowned masterpieces as the Night Watch and contemplate it without anyone obstructing my view. Not here. It was raining heavily, it was a Sunday and bitterly cold. There was nothing particular to do and X'mas sales were at least a month in the future. We had even finished seeing all the seeable movies in town. I said, what a perfect day to go to a museum; let's go and view the Monets on loan at the Ueno Park Gallery. Dragged out reluctant husband and child and pushed them onto a fairly crowded train. That was when the first doubt took a tentative nibble at my enthusiasm. Were all these people going to view the Monets? Were they, perhaps going to drink their sake there and compose haiku to "Sunrise, an Impression"? The nibble became a positive bite when we changed trains at Shinbashi and things got sort of stickier and steamier. At Ueno station we practically had to queue up to get out of the train and from then on we resigned ourselves to be processed in the usual Japanese way, following the art-loving Japanese in a solid line at a very slow pace and spending exactly five seconds in front of each painting. There was no question of going back to see "Houses of Parliament" or "Water Lilies." Every Tom Dick and Harry, or rather, Masanobu, Tomohiko and Shigeru and his wife and two children each had thought it a perfect day to visit a museum. I wish I had thought to bring pogo sticks and pair of opera glasses. We came home and took a leisurely look at all the celebrated Monets in a large book on Impressionists, and as a bonus got to see some fantastic Monets and Renoirs too.

Then I thought I would get smart. When it was the turn of the Toulouse-Lautrecs, I picked out a working day and was congratulating myself when I didn't encounter any unusual crowds at the railway station. My joy, however died a quick but very painful death when I did encounter whole schools of children that had been brought to the gallery for a 'cultural excursion' by their art teachers. They were all solemnly parading before twenty-two versions of various pictures and listening to the five lectures going on simultaneously around them on the techniques of the maestro. I should have spent the ticket money on the very handsome volume of prints available at the gallery and saved myself the art lectures. I will know better when the van Goghs come.

For some reason, hair has always been regarded as a symbol of one's stand. In the sixties, I remember it was the Beatles' hairstyle that our parents most objected to. Then in the seventies it was the mess

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hair that authorities mistrusted. The afros became a symbol of pride in your race and a short cropped cut became a must for liberated women. Going back in the past, it was the cutting off of the small tuft of hair and growing the rest of it that signified a Hindu's break from tradition; and coming to the modern age, it is the cutting off of his top knot that severs a Sikh's ties to his community. Japan is no exception. When, at the time of the Meiji Restoration at the end of the last century Japan found herself propelled willy-nilly into the modern age, her men and women were still wearing the old-style hairdo—long hair, tied in an elaborate top-knot on the top of their heads or, in the case of the women some equally cumbersome and exquisitely beautiful confection, decorated with jewelled pins and flowers and ribbons and other ornaments. The Japanese at that time did rather tend to see themselves at the foreigners' evaluation, and so considered this arrangement of their hair as the outward symbol of their general 'backwardness', exactly as the Indians of a century before had done. But, instead of leaving things to work themselves out at an individual level, the Japanese with the usual Japanese thoroughness passed a law which made a haircut mandatory. Overnight, guess which became the most popular profession? The "Dampatsurei" law, or law forbidding men to wear their hair in the traditional top-knot, or 'chonmage' went into effect in 1871, and, for all I know, still exists on the books!

It has now begun to get really cold and people will soon begin to arrange snow-viewing parties. Though I am all for cherry-blossom and plum-blossom and Spring-foliage and Autumn-leaves viewing parties, snow is something I am perfectly happy to view on the TV, where they have started to show heavy snowfalls in Hokkaido. It will take a whole team of wild horses to get me to go and view *that*, even from inside an inn with a warm sake glass in my hand. So long.

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